

Beowulf

XXXV

"**THEN** he goes to his chamber, a grief-song chants
alone for his lost. Too large all seems,
homestead and house. So the helmet-of-Weders
hid in his heart for Herebeald
waves of woe. No way could he take
to avenge on the slayer slaughter so foul;
nor e'en could he harass that hero at all
with loathing deed, though he loved him not.

And so for the sorrow his soul endured,
men's gladness he gave up and God's light chose.

Lands and cities he left his sons
(as the wealthy do) when he went from earth.
There was strife and struggle 'twixt Swede and Geat
o'er the width of waters; war arose,
hard battle-horror, when Hrethel died,
and Ongentheow's offspring grew
strife-keen, bold, nor brooked o'er the seas
pact of peace, but pushed their hosts
to harass in hatred by Hreosnabearh.

Men of my folk for that feud had vengeance,
for woful war ('tis widely known),
though one of them bought it with blood of his heart,
a bargain hard: for Haethcyn proved
fatal that fray, for the first-of-Geats.

At morn, I heard, was the murderer killed
by kinsman for kinsman, [footnote 1] with clash of sword,
when Ongentheow met Eofor there.

Wide split the war-helm: wan he fell,
hoary Scylfing; the hand that smote him
of feud was mindful, nor flinched from the death-blow.

-- "For all that he [footnote 2] gave me, my gleaming sword
repaid him at war, -- such power I wielded, --
for lordly treasure: with land he entrusted me,
homestead and house. He had no need
from Swedish realm, or from Spear-Dane folk,
or from men of the Gifths, to get him help, --
some warrior worse for wage to buy!

Ever I fought in the front of all,
sole to the fore; and so shall I fight
while I bide in life and this blade shall last
that early and late hath loyal proved
since for my doughtiness Daeghrefn fell,

slain by my hand, the Hugas' champion.
Nor fared he thence to the Frisian king
with the booty back, and breast-adornments;
but, slain in struggle, that standard-bearer
fell, atheling brave. Not with blade was he slain,
but his bones were broken by brawny gripe,
his heart-waves stilled. -- The sword-edge now,
hard blade and my hand, for the hoard shall strive."

Beowulf spake, and a battle-vow made
his last of all: "I have lived through many
wars in my youth; now once again,
old folk-defender, feud will I seek,
do doughty deeds, if the dark destroyer
forth from his cavern come to fight me!"
Then hailed he the helmeted heroes all,
for the last time greeting his liegemen dear,
comrades of war: "I should carry no weapon,
no sword to the serpent, if sure I knew
how, with such enemy, else my vows
I could gain as I did in Grendel's day.
But fire in this fight I must fear me now,
and poisonous breath; so I bring with me
breastplate and board. [footnote 3] From the barrow's keeper
no footbreadth flee I. One fight shall end
our war by the wall, as Wyrd allots,
all mankind's master. My mood is bold
but forbears to boast o'er this battling-flyer.
-- Now abide by the barrow, ye breastplate-mailed,
ye heroes in harness, which of us twain
better from battle-rush bear his wounds.
Wait ye the finish. The fight is not yours,
nor meet for any but me alone
to measure might with this monster here
and play the hero. Hardily I
shall win that wealth, or war shall seize,
cruel killing, your king and lord!"

Up stood then with shield the sturdy champion,
stayed by the strength of his single manhood,
and hardy 'neath helmet his harness bore
under cleft of the cliffs: no coward's path!
Soon spied by the wall that warrior chief,
survivor of many a victory-field
where foemen fought with furious clashings,
an arch of stone; and within, a stream

that broke from the barrow. The brooklet's wave
 was hot with fire. The hoard that way
 he never could hope unharmed to near,
or endure those deeps, [footnote 4] for the dragon's flame.
 Then let from his breast, for he burst with rage,
 the Weder-Geat prince a word outgo;
 stormed the stark-heart; stern went ringing
 and clear his cry 'neath the cliff-rocks gray.
 The hoard-guard heard a human voice;
 his rage was enkindled. No respite now
 for pact of peace! The poison-breath
of that foul worm first came forth from the cave,
 hot reek-of-fight: the rocks resounded.
 Stout by the stone-way his shield he raised,
 lord of the Geats, against the loathed-one;
 while with courage keen that coiled foe
 came seeking strife. The sturdy king
 had drawn his sword, not dull of edge,
 heirloom old; and each of the two
 felt fear of his foe, though fierce their mood.
 Stoutly stood with his shield high-raised
 the warrior king, as the worm now coiled
 together amain: the mailed-one waited.
 Now, spire by spire, fast sped and glided
 that blazing serpent. The shield protected,
 soul and body a shorter while
 for the hero-king than his heart desired,
 could his will have wielded the welcome respite
 but once in his life! But Wyrd denied it,
 and victory's honors. -- His arm he lifted
 lord of the Geats, the grim foe smote
 with atheling's heirloom. Its edge was turned
 brown blade, on the bone, and bit more feebly
 than its noble master had need of then
 in his baleful stress. -- Then the barrow's keeper
 waxed full wild for that weighty blow,
 cast deadly flames; wide drove and far
 those vicious fires. No victor's glory
 the Geats' lord boasted; his brand had failed,
 naked in battle, as never it should,
 excellent iron! -- 'Twas no easy path
 that Ecgtheow's honored heir must tread
 over the plain to the place of the foe;
 for against his will he must win a home
 elsewhere far, as must all men, leaving
 this lapsing life! -- Not long it was

ere those champions grimly closed again.
The hoard-guard was heartened; high heaved his breast
once more; and by peril was pressed again,
enfolded in flames, the folk-commander!
Nor yet about him his band of comrades,
sons of athelings, armed stood
with warlike front: to the woods they bent them,
their lives to save. But the soul of one
with care was cumbered. Kinship true
can never be marred in a noble mind!

Footnotes.

1.

Eofor for Wulf. -- The immediate provocation for Eofor in killing "the hoary Scyfing," Ongentheow, is that the latter has just struck Wulf down; but the king, Haethcyn, is also avenged by the blow. See the detailed description below.

2.

Hygelac.

3.

Shield.

4.

The hollow passage.